

Occupational Stress and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The word Stress is connoted as a state of affair involving demand on physical or mental energy. A condition or circumstance which can disturb the normal physical and mental health of an individual. In the era of highly competitive and complex nature of society and work places, every body is undergoing huge work stress and personal stress also. According to a study the costs of stress on organisation is more than 20 times that of all strikes combined. If it is not dealt with on urgent basis various kinds of problems will arise. In this context, the present article throws light on different aspects of occupational stress and strategies to tackle it.

Key Words : Occupational Stress, Coping Strategies.

Stress is an emotional state that is experienced by an individual. A stressor is the agent that causes the stress. Stress is often perceived as a negative condition but a certain level of stress is necessary for effective functioning. High levels of stress for extended periods may have detrimental effect on an individual's health and wellbeing.

Work Stress :

If a worker perceives they have a high level of responsibility for output or deadline but little control over the resources to meet demands, then a number of stress symptoms can become evident. These can include sleeplessness, anxiety, depression and the onset of a number of physical ailments.

If the workplace stress and causal factors are recognised, it may be dealt with effectively, stress is workplace hazard that should be identified, assessed and controlled in the same manner as other hazards.

Inherent Stress :

Every job, by its nature, carries certain amount of stress. While choosing an occupation one has to broadly assess the inherent stress component and check whether that suits one's own basic personality traits. In a majority of cases the decision to take up a particular occupation is decided by considerations other than 'job-fit' criterion. But once in an occupation, one has to accept the inherent stress associated with it and quickly adapt to live with it. Even the perception of inherent stress varies from person to person in the same occupation. Inherent stress in each occupation is unique to it though we can generalise in a broad sense.

Induced Stress :

This is the part of the stress with majority contributions from the colleagues, company policies etc. Though some of these can be predicted, most of the timing, quantum and the duration of the induced stress is highly unpredictable and as such not easy to handle effectively.

Some of the company policies like outdated and impractical travel restrictions, pseudo austerity measures, and performance evaluation criteria can escalate the stress content.

Also the working environment can have a lot of stress initiators in the form of unreasonable targets, lack of team spirit, responsibility without authority, apparent lack of trust by superior and colleagues, ego clashes, peer pressures etc.

Self-inflicted Stress :

By their own personality trait, people pushed into an already stressful situation tend to react to the situation defense and ultimately aggravate the stress quotient thereby triggering a chain reaction.

Everybody has a personal ego and a professional ego. Any hurt to either of them causes a stressful reaction, the intensity and extent of varies from person to person.

Sources of Occupational Stress :

High demand in the Occupation :

Some occupations are more stressful than others. According to the survey conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) the factors like time pressures, too many meetings, difficulties in meeting set goals of the organisations. At the lower levels of the jobs also, there is a lot of stress due to equipment breakdowns or role frustration such as low status, inadequate supervision etc. Jobs where high temperature, noise and pollution are also high, the high stress levels are prevailed.

Role Conflicts :

A role is a general set of rules indicating how persons holding positions shall behave. The expectations of the various roles in the occupation may cause heavy discomfort and stress. Four types of role conflicts may come for discussion which may create stress.

a. Intra sender role Conflict :

It occurs when one person asks you to accomplish two objectives that are in apparent conflict. If your superior asks you to make you hurry and finish the work but also cut your pay for the mistakes you commit. The stress levels get increased.

b. Inter Sender Role Conflict :

It occurs when two or more senders give you incompatible directions. The superior may want the worker to complete the project urgently without given much time, but the organisation does not allow to pay overtime payment to the clerical assistance.

c. Inter Role Conflict :

It occurs when two different roles that an individual play are in conflict. The organisation may want the individual to travel a minimum of twenty days in a month if promoted, the responsibility of the family creates the conflict. It causes the stress.

d. Person Role Conflict :

The roles that the organisation expects the individual to occupy in conflict with employee's basic values. The organisation has given power to fire the subordinates who perform substandard; but the individual's conscience may stop him to do so as it is against his humanistic values.

Stress arises when an individual fails when an individual fails to satisfy contrasting expectations at the same time. It is shown below how it happens.

Employee want Manager	Manager may look at his job as one demanding the following
To be friendly and helpful To reward better effort To take care of their interest To avoid advise and counsel when they go off the track in a friendly tone.	To keep the employees under check To achieve the targets. To see that the policies of the company are strictly adhered to. To allow no room for lethargy, mistakes and complacency etc.,

Role Ambiguity :

Role ambiguity occurs when individual's role is not clear, when there is a lack of clarity about the objective of the job or the scope of an individual's responsibilities. Stress is experienced when an individual loses a sense of certainty and predictability in the work role. However, role ambiguity is not only the experience of new employees. Even the veteran employees experience it in the case of major reorganization at the workplace.

Role Overload :

Role overload occurs when an individual is not able to complete the work that is part of a particular job. The concept of 'too much work' can be divided into two categories. The first is quantitative role overload which occurs when the individual does not have enough time to complete all of the work that is required of a job. The other is qualitative role overload which occurs when employees do not believe they can perform adequately with the efforts or skills they possess.

Role Underload :

At the extreme, role underload, or having nothing to do also to be quite stressful. It leads to low self-esteem and stimulation and health problems relating to nervous complaints. There is no wonder that the jobs that demand too little from workers are unpleasant, boring and stressful.

Ineffective Communication :

Stress can emerge from lack of communication or from lack of the right kind of communication at the right time. It will create huge stress.

Responsibility :

Any type of responsibility can be burdensome for some people. According to a research study, the more likely the person used to smoke heavily, have high blood pressure and show high cholesterol level. On contrary, the more responsibility for the things the employee reported, the lower these indications.

Change of Job :

Individuals and work undergo constant changes as organizations try to become more competitive and aggressive in the market place. These changes can cause stress for the holder. Change can be especially stressful for individuals afraid of losing their jobs.

Climate within the Organisation :

The culture or climate has also been suggested to be a source of occupational stress. The 'culture' of an organization is defined by the beliefs and expectations shared by the organizational members. Office politics is said to be an important factor in a number of organizational practices, promotions or transfers, division of authority, etc.

Climate relates to both physical and psychological. Employees can experience stress when they feel that they should get more money for their work, or if company restrains them from doing such things feel they must do to be effective in their job.

Work Setting variables :

There are specific work setting variables that are linked to occupational stress and how they relate to intervention. They are role characteristics, job characteristics, interpersonal relationships, organizational structure and climate, human resource management practices, and physical qualities and technology.

The pace at which an individual must do work :

One of the characteristics that influence occupational stress is the pace at which an individual must do work. Work pace is concerned with who or what controls the pace of work, particularly the amount of control an employee has over the work process.

Repetition in work :

The amount of repetition in work is another job characteristic that can influence occupational stress. The more repetitive a particular job, the more likely the employee can experience stress.

Repetition has been defined as work in which a discrete set of task activities are repeated over and over in the same order without planned interruptions by other activities. A related term, monotony, has been used to describe the nature and impact of stimulation provided by work.

Finally, a third related variable, boredom, is an ill-defined concept with strong emotional correlates.

Having to work at times other than the traditional 9am to 5pm day is another factor that might lead to occupational stress. Some occupations, such as hospitals and policing, involve shift work out of social necessity where there is a social need to have around-the clock coverage. Both mental efficiency and work motivation are directly and indirectly affected by shift work. Shift work has also been associated with psychosocial difficulties. These difficulties arise from the fact that our society is daytime oriented. Shift work might lead a worker to experience domestic pressure, spousal/familial difficulties and social isolation.

Relationship an employee has with a boss or supervisor :

The relationship an employee has with a boss or supervisor can determine the amount of stress. Having 'considerate' leadership from supervisors leads employees to experience less job stress.

The leadership style that will be most effective in helping employees deal with stress will vary across individuals and situations.

Still another potentially stressful relationship within the workplace is found in interactions with customers or clients. The potentially stressful nature of relationships with clients has been examined in the light of occupational burnout. Service providers may become easy targets for job stress because of the strong feelings of personal responsibility they experience in helping others and because of the infrequent feedback about work success that they receive.

Organizational structure :

It plays a significant role in determining occupational stress. In general, structures which allow individuals more decision making power produce less stress. Increased decision making enhances the meaningfulness an employee finds in work and provides the employee with a greater sense of autonomy, responsibility, certainty, control and ownership.

A related organizational variable associated with job stress involves the position or level an individual occupies within the organization. Employees who hold jobs at the low end of organizational hierarchy are more likely to experience stress.

Organizational Territory :

Organizational Territory is the personal space or arena of activities within which an employee works. Working within one's own department or being transferred to a new department can play significant role in creating stress.

Certain stressors are associated with the mid-career development of individuals. Occupational locking-in is a situation when people feel boxed-in because they have no ability to move from their present job or when the only job for which they are qualified is the one they already hold.

Stress results as individuals become aware of their advancing age and mortality, career/life goals that will not be attained, decreased potential for job mobility, etc.

Inadequately rewarded for performance :

If employees feel that they are not being adequately rewarded for performance, they are likely to encounter stress. Rewards for performance include the traditional monetary compensation and benefits in organizations. In addition, stress might result if employees feel they are not receiving adequate informal rewards. Such rewards might involve special treatment, privilege, recognition, perks.

Transitions in work :

Transitions in work can be stressful because of the changes an individual must make in work and in life outside of work. An individual might feel uncertain, helpless and afraid of unknown work demands.

Coping Strategies :

Health care costs consume a growing part of the costs of doing business. Occupational stress has been estimated to cost Indian industry crores of rupees in absenteeism, diminished productivity, compensation claims, health insurance, direct medical expenses etc. To get some perspectives these costs are more than 20 times of all strikes combined.

On primary level, the factors causing stress should be eliminated structurally, if at all possible. Change strategies include constructive performance management, clear communication and accurate job descriptions. Secondary level type interventions focus on workers who are already exhibiting stress symptoms. The aim is to prevent the conditions progressing further. Some strategies that can be used are health screening and stress management programs. Tertiary level interventions are used when workers are quite ill. Workers are given rehabilitation services which include psychological counselling assistance.

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